

Tom Burnham: 1948 – 2018 RIP

Memorial compiled by Milo Schield



Taken by Linda Schield, November 2002. Linda titles this "*An Agreeable Distraction*"

According to Tom's mom in "The Anderson Years":

Thomas Van Vechten Burnham was born October 23, 1948 in Mt. Vernon, Ohio. He was named for his great grandfather, Thomas Madison Anderson, and his Revolutionary War Patriot, Teunis Teunissen Van Vechten (whose grandfather emigrated from Holland after sailing here as Henry Hudson's first mate).

Tom was the first child of John Simpson Burnham (1920-2006) and (Ruth) Rebecca Anderson Burnham (1919-2011). His siblings were May (originally named Mary Anne, born November 1950), and Ellen Louise (born with Down syndrome; November 7, 1952). Ellen died October 3, 2001. The family moved from Ohio to Denver in 1955, where the children grew up. The three siblings were all 2 years apart with their birthdays within 3 weeks of each other.

According to May (Tom's first and closest sister):

Although I was 2 years younger, I was Tom's primary playmate through elementary school. We spent hours playing board games and card games, making up new rules to make the games more interesting when we got bored with them. When he finally taught me how to beat him at Chinese checkers, he never played it with me again! We also played marbles indoors on the carpet during the winter months, and I always beat him, but our dad would go out to the "marble mine" in the garage and bring Tom another handful of marbles so he could keep playing!

In junior high and high school he made friends with some of his fellow Boy Scouts, so Tom and I were not as close after that.

He drove our mom a little crazy with his behavior of taking apart everything he could get his hands on, including all the locks and doorknobs in the house, several of the clocks, and at least one radio. Tom's favorite hobby was helping our dad tinker with the "Chug", a homemade go-cart they liked to drive around in the high school parking lot across the street from the block we lived on.

Tom was born with a cleft palate and had seven surgeries before his second birthday. Beyond that he was healthy except for developing Scoliosis as a teenager. He attended Washington Park Elementary, Byers Junior High and South High, all neighborhood schools in the Denver Public School System. He was an active Boy Scout and participated in the Methodist Church until he declared his atheism when he was 17. Tom was not terribly well adjusted socially but was extremely brilliant, and in 1965 he scored 100% on both the SAT and the ACT. He began taking higher level math at Metro State College in Denver during his sophomore year in high school and after graduation in 1966, he went to the Iowa State University at Ames where he graduated with a B.S. in Computer Science in 1970.

I don't really know why he chose Iowa State, but I suspect it was one of the few schools offering Computer Science at the time. I have found a journal Tom started in his early 20s. I've only read a few pages, but I learned that he planned to become a professional writer. I was never aware of that before.

In conversation with Milo, May mentioned the following:

Tom had six surgeries during his first year of life. At that time it was customary to remove the infant from the home. This lack of contact with his mom may explain in part why Tom was unable to bond with his mother. Tom thought his inability to bond with his mom was due to the ongoing family tension between his dad and mom involved in caring for his autistic sibling.

Tom developed a deformed spine (scoliosis) and Asperger's. Tom may have been born with Marfan's syndrome (This syndrome may have explained Lincoln's exceptional height: 6' 4".) This combination of physical and mental problems marked Tom for life.

According to Dennis Edwall,

I met Tom as a result of a chance pairing of the two of us in the dorm at Iowa State when both of us were freshmen (roommates). It was to have a profound influence on my life, for the better, for this was how I was first exposed to Objectivism. We lived together for that academic year, and then in our four years, we again lived together, this time in off-campus housing.

Tom was a good friend who would never let me get away with sloppy thinking. Years later, I tried reaching out to him, but he never responded. My regret is that I was not able to help him as much as he helped me. I will continue to miss him.

According to Roger Bissell,

Tom loved his mountain bike, and he sometimes dressed in garishly clashing clothing combinations, such as orange plaid shorts and a yellow plaid shirt. My favorite saying by him was, "Focus, you whim-worshiper." Tom had a very sharp mind. During the early 1970s, he gave me very helpful feedback on my early writings on objectivity, ethics, and aesthetics. We fell out of touch after about 1975."

Tom began studies at Iowa State the fall of 1966, the same as me and Dennis Edwall. Each of us began in the dorms and ended up off-campus because of all the noise and rowdiness that interfered with our studies. I met Tom in the spring of 1967, and he helped me form the Students of Objectivism group at Iowa State. Dennis and I roomed together for a year, and then Tom and Dennis roomed together after I moved to Iowa City in 1969. Tom finished his degree at Iowa State in the spring of 1970 and moved to Iowa City that summer.

According to Tom Marsh,

Even though many years have passed since I had contact with him (it seems that he and I had one telephone conversation right after he moved to Texas) my memories of him are indeed fond and vivid. I, too, met him through a newly formed Objectivist group at Iowa State in Ames in the fall of 1970. He and Dennis Edwall shared an apartment, and I would visit them on occasion, always to talk... we were all so intensely involved in examining the cultural and philosophical issues of the day, especially in the context of being devotees of Ayn Rand. A couple of memories stand out, one was of a joke he told so well that I asked him to re-tell it far too often! It was "the one about the owl and the bear..." "Did you ever hear the one about the own and the bear?" he would ask, at my urging. I would always say "No" and he would proceed. I don't even remember the body of the joke, except for the punchline, which he would recite in his resonant, Murrow-like voice: "Details, Details. We make policy decisions!" For some reason I loved to hear him speak those words, and I laughed every time. I don't even think it annoyed him.

The other fond memory is not so much of interaction with Tom, but a visual one of his living space. Tom had a poster of New York City, a night view of Manhattan, with the Empire State Building prominent. I loved that poster, and like a true Randian, dreamed of living there some day. Well, way led on to way, and I never lived there. But I loved Tom's poster.

In September of 1971 I transferred to the Layton School of Art in Milwaukee. In early 1972, (I think) it was at one of the Equitarian Associates conferences (my memory is foggy here), where I did the charcoal portrait of Tom. It seems to me that he commissioned it. My memory is clear of his posing, though, because I wanted to show him reading and thinking, in my eyes the hallmarks of Tom Burnham.

Thank you for requesting my memories of this intensely brilliant and idiosyncratic man.

God bless you, Milo.

According to Brian Adam,

Tom was brilliant, articulate, fun, frustrating and could cut immediately to the kernel of a discussion. I think he read every book and author ever published (except Norman Vincent Peale). He did have a wonderful sense of humor and would have loved that comment. For a period, he and I talked a lot, he visited and stayed with us, but life happens, and we lost touch over the years.

According to JP Miller,

I may have met Thomas V. V. Burnham at an Equitarian Associates conference earlier but I got to know him when Milo hired me as a technician to repair Centronics printers and Datapoint terminals for BDS. I was out of money again to finish college.

Tom was this gruff, irascible character in a distorted body who demonstrated no patience with me and I had little contact with him at first. I went for training on the Centronics printers and essentially card swapping training on the Datapoint terminals. I knew logic and electronics but really didn't understand the architecture and function of a computer. The first one hour exam of an introductory computer science course had earned me the lowest grade in the class and intimidated me about computers.

I asked Milo for help and he suggested I talk with Tom. Initially he was annoyed but soon was deep into the assembly level architecture of the Datapoint. In a number of sessions he cleared my fog and kindled in me an interest in computers.

I had started at Iowa State University in Electrical Engineering in 1967 expecting to specialize in communications because of my interest in amateur radio. Based on the other's comments I missed the opportunity to meet Tom, Dennis Edwall, Roger Bissell, and Tom Marsh though we were there contemporaneously. They might have introduced me to the work of Ayn Rand 3 years sooner.

Back to BDS. Tom was a Saab snob. The times I rode with him he accelerated hard, snapped through the gears and cornered so as to drive blood from the left side of my face to the right; that is, what hadn't already drained to my stomach. He sort of admitted it was the only car he could fit in after I tried to give him a ride once in my Corolla. He absolutely could not get in. The only time I ever saw him embarrassed was when he spun his Saab out on an icy road.

He would make a big issue of sometimes the smallest of things. He leaned his chair against the radiator in the office and the printer across the room deselected. Soon he had found a dozen ways to move his chair to toggle the select line from different parts of the room and loudly exclaiming at each new discovery. Of course it was the dead of winter. Humidity indoors was 5%. He was generating static discharge. The printer was clear across the room and its cable was probably a good antenna.

In the last few months of BDS. Tom, Dennis Bottjen and I would go out once or twice a week to some nudie bar and talk about girls, books, gambling. Dennis liked gambling. Tom and I both liked Mickey Spillane. We compared notes on a woman we both dated briefly. And Tom offered me advice when I got a crush on a local photographer. We would eat dinner, go bowling and talk some more.

My time at BDS was just one year. He and I talked a couple more times after that. I got my BSEE, now with a computer focus, from ISU in 1978 and moved to Houston to work for Texas Instruments. I heard he was in San Antonio and called him. We talked briefly about me visiting without making specific plans. Then a hurricane was approaching Houston and being an Iowa boy I thought I should get out of town. I called Tom and he said come to San Antonio and stay with him. The ironic thing is that hurricane made an unexpected turn. I didn't have to evacuate. Nothing happened in Houston. Instead the hurricane went inland and caused massive flooding in San Antonio.

He never answered my calls or letters after that. But there is a little twist. I worked for Bell and Howell 1975 through 1978 on a system that used an Intel 8008 microprocessor. That microprocessor was built for Datapoint but was too slow and Intel was given the right to produce it for general use. In 1977 I built an Altair home computer with an Intel 8080 microprocessor. From 1987 until 2010 I worked for Compaq and Hewlett Packard designing numerous PCs and servers based on Intel 386, 486, Pentium and Xeon processors. From 2011 to 2015 I worked for Intel on multi-core server processors. Every one of those processors embodies the remnants of the Datapoint architecture that Tom so patiently taught me in 1973. He provided a shift in my career and a theme to run through it in those few days of instruction.

Thank you, Tom.

According to Dennis Bottjen,

I first met Tom at Iowa State University in 1969. We were both connected to the Objectivist movement and met at Richard and Signe Smith's home. JP's description of Tom as irascible is right on target. But under the rough exterior, there occasionally surfaced a man who had a soft, feeling, sympathetic edge.

Tom and I worked for Bantam Data in 1974. What a great experience for me to be working with some of the most interesting people I've ever known, including of course, Tom Burnham. Bantam Date was a startup company that's goal was to make personal computers. Bill Gates - you were a little late to the table, but you were able to access the funds that made it work for you.

As JP said in his notes about Tom, we used to go out together frequently. JP said I liked to gamble and that may be true, but I'd rather say I liked playing poker, which had recently become legal in Iowa bars. And since Bantam Data was short on funds, I used to play poker to try to make some money to live on. Tom, on the other hand, would bellow at Milo that he needed money for rent. Pretty sure he said he could go a little hungry but had to have a place to sleep at night.

Tom's bellowing was common at the office. He would bellow "God damn it Milo, it can't be done in two days!" But like a teddy bear, you couldn't take the bellowing seriously.

I went to Tom's place one time to play Scrabble. Now Tom was a genius who thought I didn't stand a chance at the game. And truly, Tom's IQ was probably twice mine. But I was pretty good with words and even better at making the board hard to add words to. So his seven-letter words never had a chance to be placed. After I had won the first game, Tom was so incredulous that he bellowed "That was pure luck" and demanded a rematch.

To my knowledge, we have lost at least three people from that Objectivist group from Iowa State: George, Signe and now Tom. I am deeply saddened by these losses. But I do remember the times with great fondness and affection.

According to Becky Bissell,

I remember Tom as a sensitive man, clever and witty, but lonely. I liked him. He was very deep, would have been interesting to know more.

According to Milo Schield,

I moved to Iowa City in August, 1968 after graduating with a PhD in Space Physics from Rice University in Houston. Doug Rasmussen, Joel Myklebust and Maurice Goldenberg were forming a Society for the New Intellectual. I became their faculty advisor. We started Equitarian Associates. I met Tom in 1969-1970, when he attended a conference that we hosted in Iowa City.

During our first meeting, Tom began talking about his personal problems. I don't recall the specifics, but they probably were historical (family) and psychological. I don't normally give a curt reply to someone I've never met before, but I think I said, "I'm really not interested in your psychological problems; I'm interested in your mind." And that set the basis for our relationship.

After his graduation in 1970, I hired Tom as a programmer in the Schield Stock Service (PL1: main-frame) and later at Bantam Data (Datapoint micro-computer: Basic). In 1975, Tom moved to Davenport, Iowa to program traffic-controls for Eagle Signal. Later, he was hired by Peter Schofield to work as a systems programmer for Datapoint Corporation in San Antonio. Tom took on responsibility for designing the Datapoint operating system.

In the early 80s, Tom became unable to maintain the concentration and focus necessary for his work as a systems designer. He left Datapoint and lived with a woman he knew from Mensa. He never got a medical diagnosis, so he never got any disability compensation. I reconnected with Tom in the mid-80s. In the mid-90s, Tom began working – at his own pace – with me on statistics projects. From 1995 to 2014, Tom and I worked together on a daily or weekly basis.

Tom co-authored 8 papers with me, was a substantial contributor on six, and was acknowledged for consulting or editorial services on 16 papers. We spent several years analyzing how ordinary English was used to describe or compare rates and percentages using text data from the Cobuild database. Tom wrote two major computer programs in Visual Basic. One gave users immediate feedback on their written attempts to describe a statistics or to compare two statistics. A list of Tom's accomplishments is at www.statlit.org/pdf/2016-Burnham-Accomplishments.pdf

Tom had an incredible influence on me. He sharpened my thinking and helped me focus on essentials. Tom never wrote much. Perhaps he had such high standards for himself. But he had no trouble critiquing what others wrote. We made a good team since I never took his criticism personally and almost always appreciated his critique and included his suggestions. The result was certainly better than what either of us could have done alone.

I noticed Tom's "brain fog" around 2008. By 2014, Tom had weeks where he was unable to maintain focus. His participation dropped off. He spent more time "processing" his childhood.

Tom's first hospitalization was June 2015. The hospital determined that he had congestive heart failure and fluid in his lungs. In July, Linda went to San Antonio to help him at home.

By 2016, Tom wasn't able to care for himself. His second hospitalization was in the fall. Tom agreed that he needed to move to Spokane to be with his sister, May Cotton. According to May, he said, "If I die, I want to die near the mountains." I flew to San Antonio, helped him move, and then flew with him to Spokane. Shortly after relocating, Tom was back in the hospital: liver failure (alcohol?), pneumonia and cellulitis: a common, potentially-serious bacterial skin infection.

One time when Tom was saying that his emotional processing was "proceeding". I said, "Tom, you've been saying things are improving for years. I don't see any improvement in your ability to work or focus." There was a long pause before he replied, "Maybe not."

After Tom's death, Tom's sister, May Cotton, said:

Tom's "processing" is called "emotional processing" and is common in autism. (Asperger's is now considered a type of high functioning autism.) A friend, Helen, told me that people with autism do not have properly functioning amygdalae, which makes it impossible to complete the "processing" because they cannot recognize the emotional responses without guidance. The problem Tom faced was that he would not accept guidance.

Tom died of a heart attack on April 22: one day after being moved into an assisted-living nursing home. As he said, "A nursing home is where old people go to die."

Condolences and best wishes to Tom's sister, May Cotton, for taking care of Tom during his final years. As she said, "Now Tom is free of the body and mind that tormented him throughout his life."



Milo and Tom: 2002



Tom

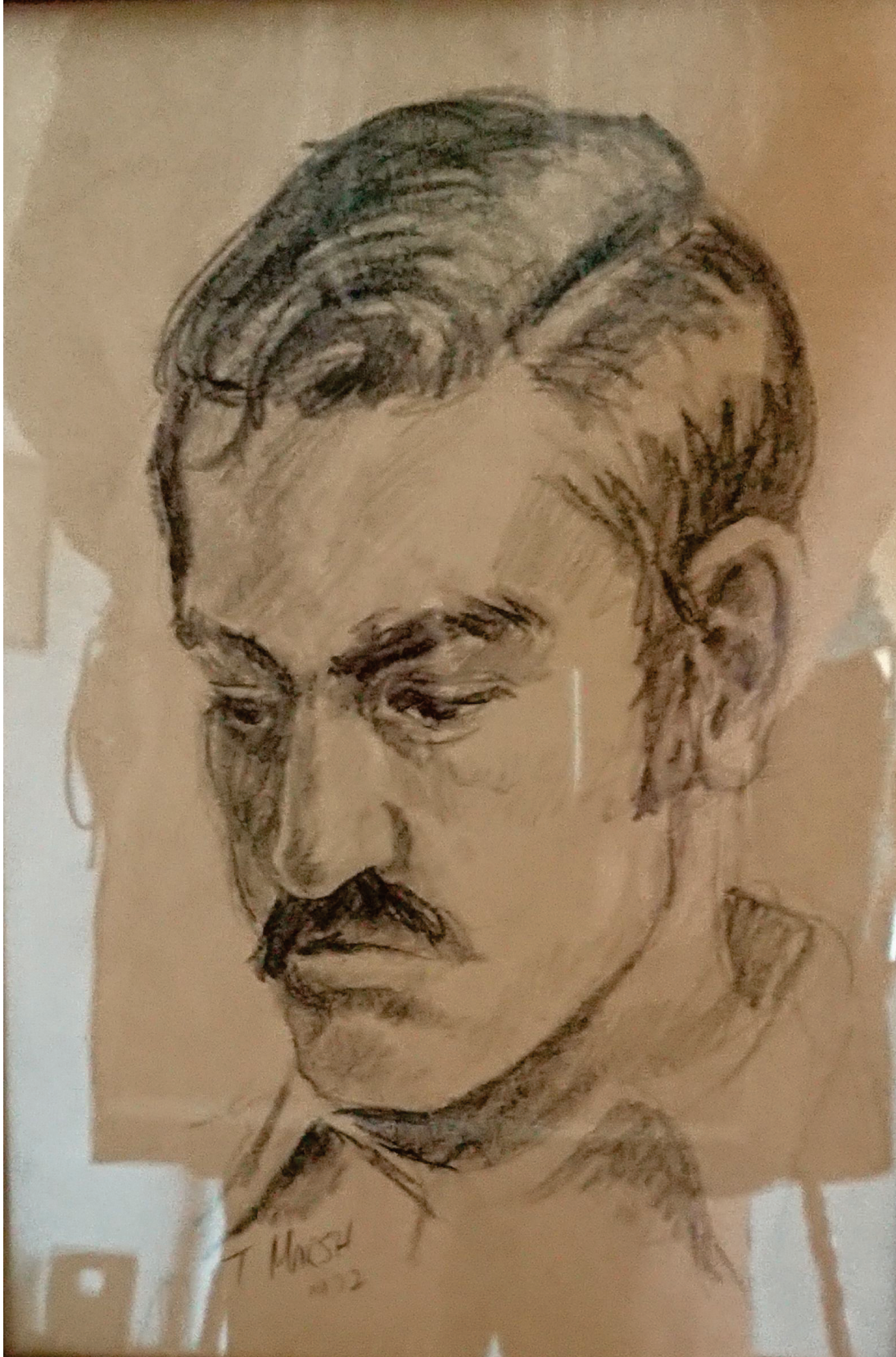
Data on some mutual friends:

George Hock

Full Name George Hock
Birth Date 21 May 1932
Death Date 1 Sep 1976
Death Location Corpus Christi, TX, 78413

Signe Meservey...

Birth date: 1940, Sept
Death Date 2008, Fall
Death location Olomouc, Czech Republic



Drawing by Tom Marsh (1972). Commissioned by Tom Burnham